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Globalization and interdependence: science and technology for development

Implementation of General Assembly resolution 60/205

Science and technology for development

Report by the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report contains information on the status of implementation of General Assembly resolution 60/205. It reports on work carried out by the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development in areas such as agriculture, rural development, information and communications technologies and environmental management. It also provides information on activities carried out by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and other relevant organizations to assist developing countries in their efforts to integrate science, technology and innovation policies in their respective national development plans and strategies. Lastly, it presents an update on United Nations system-wide collaboration on biotechnology-related activities.

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I. Introduction

1. At its sixtieth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 60/205 of 22 December 2005 on science and technology for development, in which it affirmed its commitment to assist developing countries to harness science and technology for development. In that context, the Assembly stressed the importance of a number of areas, including: research and development in the areas of health, agriculture, conservation, sustainable use of natural resources and environmental management, energy, forestry and the impact of climate change; diffusion and transfer of technology; development of renewable sources of energy, such as solar, wind and geothermal energy; policies that attract both public and private investment, domestic and foreign, that enhances knowledge, and new agricultural technologies in order to increase agricultural productivity through environmentally sustainable means.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly:

(a) Requested the Commission on Science and Technology for Development to provide a forum to address within its mandate the special needs of developing countries in areas such as agriculture, rural development, information and communications technologies (ICTs) and environmental management;

(b) Encouraged the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and other relevant organizations to assist developing countries in their efforts to integrate science, technology and innovation policies in national development strategies;

(c) Encouraged relevant bodies of the United Nations system engaged in biotechnology to collaborate with a view to enhancing effectiveness in the implementation of programmes designed to assist developing countries in building capacity in all areas of biotechnology, including for industry and agriculture, as well as for risk assessment management of biosafety;

(d) Reiterated its request to the Secretary-General of the World Summit on the Information Society to transmit to the Assembly at its sixtieth session the report of the Summit;

(e) Requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its sixty-second session a report on the implementation of the same resolution.

3. In response to the above-mentioned request of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union transmitted the report of the Tunis phase of the Summit to the Assembly at its sixtieth session (A/60/687). The present report contains information on the status of implementation of the other requests listed above.

II. Work of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development in areas such as agriculture, rural development, information and communications technologies and environmental management

4. Since its establishment in 1992 as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development

has undertaken substantive, in-depth work on a wide range of science and technology-related areas. Its work has included technology for small-scale economic activities; gender issues; ICTs for sustainable development; science and technology partnerships and networking for national capacity-building; national capacity-building on biotechnology; technology development and capacity-building for competitiveness in a digital society; promoting the application of science and technology to meet the Millennium Development Goals; bridging the technology gap between and within nations; and promoting the building of a people-centred, development-oriented and inclusive information society.

5. In selecting its work theme, the Commission has consistently based its decision on its function as a global forum for the examination of science and technology questions, and its role in providing policy guidance to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council, in particular on issues of relevance to developing countries. Its substantive work reflects the vital role of new and emerging technologies in enhancing productivity and competitiveness, as well as in underpinning national capacity-building. It also attests to the importance of integrating platform technologies, particularly biotechnology and ICTs, into the national development strategy. This pool of knowledge is a product of careful deliberations among experts and of policymakers from countries at all stages of economic and technological development, and of lessons learned from experiences of countries around the world. It constitutes a valuable source of information for Governments in the process of integrating science and technology into the national development planning. It also serves as the basis for policy advice that the Commission submits to the Economic and Social Council, and from the Council to the General Assembly at large.

6. Beginning with its tenth session, the Commission adopted a multi-stakeholder approach to include and mobilize the participation of all stakeholders, including civil society, business entities and development actors in its plenary discussions. This move enriched and broadened the Commission's work, without interfering with the Commission's intrinsic intergovernmental identity.

A. Multi-year work programme

7. At its tenth session, the Commission adopted a multi-year work programme. This measure would ensure the fulfilment of the Commission's additional mandate of assisting the Economic and Social Council in the follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society while at the same time undertaking work related to paragraph 60 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome (General Assembly resolution 60/1). It would also enable the Commission to maintain its unique role as a global forum for the examination of science and technology questions, for improving understanding of science and technology policies for development, and for the formulation of recommendations and guidelines on science and technology matters within the United Nations system.

8. Underpinned by a solid development orientation, the work programme of the Commission is built on two elements:

(a) For each biennium, the Commission will examine a specific theme related to the building of the information society, with a view to narrowing the digital divide, including but not limited to:

(i) Development-oriented policies for socio-economic inclusive information society, including access, infrastructure and an enabling environment;

(ii) Improvements and innovations in existing financing mechanisms;

(iii) Measuring the information society;

(iv) Multi-stakeholder partnerships for building the information society;

(v) Innovation, research, technology transfer for mutual advantage, entrepreneurship and collaborative development in the information society;

(b) The Commission will also examine, within its original mandate, the implication of science and technology for development, with particular attention to the following areas:

(i) Science, technology and engineering for innovation and capacity-building in education and research;

(ii) New and emerging technologies;

(iii) Virtual science libraries and geospatial analysis of development issues;

(iv) Technologies to address challenges in areas such as energy, agriculture, water and health care.

B. Joint projects and initiatives with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

9. The Commission has undertaken a number of initiatives that addresses the special needs of developing countries in areas such as agriculture, rural development, ICTs and environmental management, through projects undertaken in collaboration with UNCTAD.

1. Policy forum on information and communications technology investment in Africa

10. The Commission, UNCTAD and the Government of Tunisia, co-organized the ICT for All Tunis+1 Forum entitled "ICT Investment in Africa", in Hammamet, Tunisia, on 26 and 27 October 2006, one year after the Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society. The Forum aimed at contributing to the discussion on policy and strategy to channel domestic and foreign investment in knowledge economy development in Africa.

11. The Forum addressed the following as main themes: e-strategies and ICT development in Africa; enabling environment for ICT development in Africa; public-private partnership, and opportunities for investments in ICT. Attended by over 500 participants representing African policymakers and potential investors, the Forum provided an important opportunity for African policymakers to address the issue of financing the Information Society, which constitutes the main challenge for African countries, with a view to finding innovative solutions.

2. Network of Centres of Excellence

12. The Commission, in collaboration with UNCTAD, launched in 2005 the project on the Network of Centres of Excellence. The project is executed through a group of scientific and technological institutions in developing countries, selected

for their competence and state-of-the-art facilities. With these as regional hubs for learning and training, the Network organizes long- and short-term training courses and workshops for scientists and engineers from developing countries, especially from Africa. An additional benefit of these regional training courses is that they create linkages within the scientific community and therefore serve to enhance the mobility of scientists. The priority areas at this initial phase of the project are ICT and biotechnology applications in development.

13. Currently there are six centres in the Network,[1] where close to 100 scientists have received training. The courses have covered the following areas: malaria-related research, animal biotechnology, bioinformatics, infectious disease, biotechnology and bio-industry, molecular biology, bio-assay techniques for drug discovery as well as ICT applications in agriculture.

3. Connect Africa

14. Connect Africa is a joint project of the Commission and UNCTAD, undertaken in partnership with the Centre des Technologies de l'Information (Information Technologies Centre) of the State of Geneva in Switzerland. The project seeks to support developing countries efforts to translate national ICT policy into action through, initially, customized training of ICT engineers and technicians from African least developed countries. Thus far, Lesotho and Mali have benefited from the pilot phase of the project.

15. Its training component, designed to address the special needs and specific conditions of the participating country, covers network management and computer maintenance to ICT engineers and technical personnel; and digital education in selected subjects such as languages, mathematics, sciences and graphics. The project also provides computers for use in key areas of public service delivery, such as tertiary training centres, secondary schools, health centres and telecentres.

16. Encouraged by the success of the pilot phase and by the increasing number of requests from other interested countries, UNCTAD has plans to expand the project to other least developed countries in Africa. By improving access to information and knowledge through ICTs, particularly in remote and rural areas, the project is on track to achieving its long-term objective to contribute to the achievement of the World Summit on the Information Society indicative targets and the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015.

III. The work of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in the area of science, technology and innovation policies

17. The work of UNCTAD in this area has primarily been carried out through its science, technology and innovation policy reviews.

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[1] Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa; Agricultural Genetic Engineering Research Institute, Giza, Egypt; International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, New Delhi, India; Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, United Republic of Tanzania; H. E. J. Research Institute of Chemistry, University of Karachi, Pakistan; National Engineering Research Centre for Information Technology in Agriculture, Beijing, China.

A. Science, technology and innovation policy reviews

18. Science, technology and innovation policy reviews are demand-driven technical assistance projects aimed at assisting interested developing countries with information-based policy recommendations formulated to their specific needs and circumstances. They include an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the country's science and technology-related policies and measures, as well as the opportunities and threats that could arise from within and outside its borders. The reviews are end products of information collected from desk and online research, on-site evaluation missions, discussions with decision makers and policymakers, and consultations with a wide spectrum of stakeholders from both public and private sectors as well as important development partners and non-governmental organizations. An important component of the policy reviews is the role of the national counterpart, usually the government agency charged with science and technology.

19. Work is currently under way for reviews for Angola and Mauritania. While an increasing number of countries have requested science, technology and innovation policy reviews, priority at this time has been accorded to African countries.

B. Policy forums on the role of science, technology and innovation policies

20. In order to raise awareness on the importance of integrating science, technology and innovation policies into national development strategies, and of supporting the efforts of developing country policymakers, UNCTAD undertook the following activities, meetings and workshops:

(a) Co-organized the International Forum on the Globalization of Research and Development, held in Beijing, from 15 to 19 December 2006;

(b) Collaborated with the World Bank in the organization of the Global Forum on Building Science, Technology, and Innovation Capacity for Sustainable Growth and Poverty Reduction, held in Washington, D.C., from 13 to 15 February 2007;

(c) Participated in the G8-UNESCO World Forum on the topic "Education, Research and Innovation: New Partnership for Sustainable Development", held in Trieste, Italy, from 10 to 12 May 2007.

C. UN-Biotech

21. UN-Biotech is an inter-agency mechanism aimed at promoting coherence in, and coordination of, United Nations system actions aimed at the implementation of the agenda defined by the Millennium Declaration and the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The scope of its work encompasses "any technological application that uses biological systems, living organisms, or derivatives thereof, to make or modify products or processes for specific uses".[2] Building on the close collaboration and partnership among the agencies of the United Nations system,

[2] As defined in article 2 of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

UN-Biotech would complement and add value to existing programmes and projects by facilitating synergies and joint efforts, so as to maximize system-wide coordination and coherence as well as effectiveness.

22. Thus far, UN-Biotech has had four meetings, each in conjunction with the annual sessions of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development in Geneva. These meetings have led to an exchange of experiences, information and training materials among UN-Biotech focal points in participating agencies both during and in-between the annual meetings. Among these has been a compendium of biotechnology-related terms in the official languages, developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for UN-Biotech use. Another project is the Common Portal, developed by the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, and designed to provide the user with a snapshot of biotechnology-related activities being undertaken by the different entities within the United Nations system, and to offer direct linkages to the biotechnology-related web pages of participating agencies' websites. At its fourth meeting, UN-Biotech focused its discussion on biotechnology-related work in Africa.